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Argentina: Criticism from Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church in Argentina has issued its first formal criticism of the military government. It is contained in a document signed by 67 of the nation's 84 bishops. Military hard-liners could react by seeking tougher measures against dissent.

In the document, drafted during their semiannual conference, the bishops catalog the reasons for their dissatisfaction with political repression in the name of counterinsurgency. Although expressed in dispassionate terms, the statement is unequivocally critical.

As their reason for going directly to the people, the bishops cite the futility of their numerous personal, unpublicized appeals to government and military leaders. In perhaps the most telling portion of the statement, the bishops say that "no theory of collective security...can justify the destruction of the human being's rights, because social order and its progress...must be subordinated to the human being and not the reverse."

The bishops probably had difficulty deciding to express their criticism openly. Although it has been clear for some time that many of them have serious misgivings about the regime, few sympathize with leftist extremists. Like most Argentines, the clerics see no real alternative to the present regime. They are probably concerned, in fact, that their criticism will weaken the relatively moderate President Videla, opening the way to still harsher repressive practices.

By going public with their criticism, the bishops have thus taken a calculated risk. While they clearly hope to add momentum to the international efforts—notably by the US—to curb human rights abuses, their position could prove counterproductive.

A number of military men will view the church statement as an unwarranted intrusion into secular matters; some officers may even conclude that the church supports—or at least sympathizes with—subversion. The bishops' criticism, therefore, could well cause military hard-liners to redouble their efforts to secure more stringent controls over all aspects of national life. 3.5(c)

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